DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 272 432 SO 017 378

AUTHOR Patrick, John J.
TITLE Critical Thinking in the Social Studies. ERIC Digest No. 30.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Jun 86
CONTRACT 400-86-0020
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizenship; *Critical Thinking; Curriculum; Elementary Secondary Education; Learning; Scholarship; *Social Studies; Study Skills; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Critical thinking is a major goal of social studies education. Teachers need to know what critical thinking is before they can successfully incorporate the skill into their teaching strategies. Understanding why critical thinking is a major goal of education in a free society helps teachers prepare students to be informed and rational participants in civic affairs and to gather enduring intellectual abilities to make themselves more effective as students. To develop skills for critical thinking requires that teachers ask challenging questions and require students to provide evidence for their answers or opinions. Encouraging students to examine different positions on controversial topics in an open supportive classroom environment prepares them for the responsibilities of participating in a free society. Included in this document are nine related references. (JEH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED272432

CRITICAL THINKING IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES

ERIC Digest No. 30

by

John J. Patrick

ERIC
Clearinghouse for Social Studies/
Social Science Education
2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana 47405

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

SP017378

ERIC

Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education
2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana 47405

ERIC Digest No. 30 June 1986

CRITICAL THINKING IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES

by John J. Patrick

Critical thinking has been a long-standing major goal of education in the social studies. It was the theme of the 1942 Yearbook of the National Council for the Social Studies. It is highlighted today in various statements and publications of state education departments, local school districts, and professional associations. Research and commentary on critical thinking have increased greatly during the last ten years. But it has not been taught extensively or satisfactorily in most social studies classrooms. Goodlad's nationwide study of schooling found little evidence of critical thinking and concluded that "preoccupation with the lower intellectual processes pervades social studies and science as well" (1984, 236).

Current efforts to promote critical thinking in the social studies will fail unless teachers know what it is, why it is important, and how to use it in the classroom. This ERIC Digest treats the (1) meaning of critical thinking, (2) primacy of critical thinking as a social studies goal, (3) inclusion of critical thinking in the social studies curriculum, and (4) means of teaching critical thinking to social studies students.

What is critical thinking?

Definitions of critical thinking vary in breadth or inclusiveness. Broad definitions equate critical thinking with the cognitive processes and strategies involved in decision making, problem solving, or inquiry. According to Robert H. Ennis (1985, 45), "Critical thinking is reflective and reasonable thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do."

Limited definitions focus on evaluation or appraisal; critical thinking is formulation and use of criteria to make warranted judgments about knowledge claims, normative statements, methods of inquiry, policy decisions, alternative positions on public issues, or any other object of concern. Critical thinking, defined narrowly, is an essential element of general cognitive processes, such as problem solving or decision making, but is not synonymous with them.

Critical thinking, whether conceived broadly or narrowly, implies curiosity, skepticism, reflection, and rationality. Critical thinkers have a propensity to raise and explore questions about beliefs, claims, evidence, definitions, conclusions, and actions.

Many proponents of critical thinking stop short of evaluating the most basic criteria, or values, by which they or their students make judgments. They would teach critical thinking only within conventional frames of reference of a society. A more profound view encourages appraisal of frameworks or sets of criteria by which judgments are made. This deeper level of critical thinking counteracts egocentric, ethnocentric, or doctrinaire judgments, which result when thinkers fail to appraise fundamental assumptions or standards.

Why is critical thinking a major goal of education in a free society?

Critical thinking is necessary to achievement of good citizenship and scholarship in a free society, two major aims of education in the social studies. A basic value of the American heritage is freedom to think and express ideas—even if they are unusual, unpopular, or critical of prevailing practices and beliefs. The Constitution guarantees civil liberties of individuals and minority groups against the tyranny of ruling elites and the tyranny of majority rule. Good citizenship in the American republic involves responsibility to be an informed and rational participant in civic affairs, which implies capability to think critically about public issues, candidates for public office, and decisions of government officials.

Lessons that stimulate questions and criticism in pursuit of truth, which are commensurate with the cognitive and personal development of students, should be encouraged in the schools of a free society. In contrast, a closed or totalitarian society never permits critical examination of prevailing and sanctioned ideas. Ability to think critically can free students from the fetters of ignorance, confusion, and unjustified claims about ideals and reality. It can contribute to dissatisfaction with tyrants or totalitarian societies and to the improvement of democratic government and free societies.

Strategies and skills in critical thinking are keys to independent judgment and learning, which can be transferred to subjects and objects of inquiry within and outside of school. Students gain enduring intellectual abilities, which can be used long after particular facts have been forgotten. They are empowered as learners and as citizens to think and act more effectively.

How can critical thinking be included effectively in the curriculum?

All students, regardless of social class or presumed limitations in ambition or ability, have some degree of potential to think critically. This potential can be developed to the fullest by embedding critical thinking in the core curriculum, school subjects required of all students. Thus, critical thinking would become an essential element in the general education of citizens rather than the privilege of intellectual or social elites. If so, opportunities for academic achievement, socioeconomic advancement, and effective citizenship will be spread more widely and equitably in our society.

Students' capabilities to think critically are likely to be increased if they practice strategies and skills systematically and extensively in all subjects of the social studies curriculum, and in a manner that is consistent with their cognitive development and prior learning experiences. Subject-specific teaching of critical thinking may be the most effective means to develop students' abilities to transfer strategies and skills to similar subjects in school and problems in life outside of school. By contrast, separate courses on critical thinking seem to be rather weak means of developing cognitive strategies and skills.

How can critical thinking be taught effectively?

Effective lessons on critical thinking interrelate subject matter and cognitive strategies and skills, because critical thinking cannot

be done meaningfully unless the student knows certain concepts and facts related fundamentally to the question under consideration. A successful critical thinker is also aware of differences in criteria and evidence used to justify propositions in different subjects, such as history, economics, and geography.

Effective teaching and learning of critical thinking involves practice of skills with recognition of how they fit together as part of a strategy or process. By contrast, practice of discrete skills is a relatively ineffective means to developing capability in critical thinking.

Development of critical thinking strategies or processes requires continuous practice under the direction of a skillful teacher. Direct or didactic teaching is a useful means to introduce strategies and skills, but reliance on this method is insufficient. Students must be stimulated to think critically on their own to resolve dilemmas, take stands on issues, judge propositions about knowledge or ideals, etc.

Learning to think critically involves multi-faceted intellectual activity involved in complex processes, such as decision making. Effective teachers challenge students to apply interrelated knowledge and skills to decisions about what to believe and what to do. In the process of justifying and evaluating knowledge claims and value judgments, involved in decision making, students are able to develop propensity for and capability in critical thinking.

Teacher modeling of critical thinking and expressions of support for it are effective classroom behaviors. Teachers who promote and practice critical thinking in the classroom contribute strongly to their students' intellectual development. Furthermore, they are likely to engender a critical spirit, or positive attitude toward critical thinking, among their students.

Certain procedures in management of classroom discussions appear to foster critical thinking. Teachers who ask challenging questions and require students to give evidence or reasons for their conclusions and opinions are likely to develop critical thinking abilities and a critical spirit.

There is a strong relationship between an open, supportive, and structured classroom climate, where opinions on issues may be explored and expressed in a free and disciplined manner, and development of critical thinking and attitudes supportive of it. Effective teachers challenge students to examine alternative positions on controversial topics or public issues, require justification for beliefs about what is true or good, and insist on orderly classroom discourse. In this manner, they provide powerful lessons on responsible scholarship and citizenship in a free society.

References and ERIC Resources

Following is a bibliography of resources, including references in this Digest. Those entries followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and or paper copy from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For price information write EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304.

Browne, M. Neil and Stuart Keeley. ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS: A GUIDE TO CRITICAL THINKING. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985.

Cornbleth, Catherine. "Critical Thinking and Cognitive Processes." In REVIEW OF RESEARCH IN SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION: 1976-1983, edited by William B. Stanley. Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies, 1985. ED 255 469.

Ennis, Robert H. "A Logical Basis for Measuring Critical Thinking Skills. EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP 43 (October 1985): 45-48.

Goodlad, John I. A PLACE CALLED SCHOOL. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984

Moore, W. Edgar, Hugh McCann, and Janet McCann. CREATIVE AND CRITICAL THINKING. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985.

Parker, Walter and John Jarolimek. CITIZENSHIP AND THE CRITICAL ROLE OF THE SOCIAL STUDIES. Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies, 1984. ED 244 880.

Paul, Richard W. CRITICAL THINKING AND THE CRITICAL PERSON. 1986. ED number to be assigned.

Sullivan, David. "Using A Textbook for Critical Thinking." NEW ENGLAND SOCIAL STUDIES BULLETIN 43 (Winter 1985-86): 31-33.

Wright, D. P. INSTRUCTION IN CRITICAL THINKING: A THREE-PART INVESTIGATION. 1977. ED 138 518.

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. 400-86-0020. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.